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The Israeli government and politicians sent mixed messages on Thursday regarding plans by former US president Jimmy Carter to meet with Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal in Damascus next week.

On the one hand, senior Israeli diplomatic officials in Jerusalem said they were "outraged" at Carter's decision. Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni have declined to meet with him when he visits Israel, citing "scheduling conflicts," while sources close to Likud chairman Binyamin Netanyahu said he was refusing to see Carter because of the Mashaal meeting.

But President Shimon Peres, Defense Minister Ehud Barak, Shas chairman Eli Yishai and Israel Beiteinu leader Avigdor Lieberman have all agreed to meet with Carter.

The former president, who brokered the Camp David peace treaty with Egypt, has been persona non grata for many Israelis since he published his book, *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*, in late 2006.

Carter will arrive Sunday afternoon and meet with Peres that evening. On Monday, he will visit Sderot, meet with Barak and speak at an event sponsored by Ha'aretz's business Web site. On Tuesday he will convene with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. On Wednesday, he will meet with Yishai and Lieberman before traveling to Damascus to meet with Mashaal on Friday.

The Atlanta-based Carter Center did not confirm the meeting with the exiled leader of Hamas, but a senior Hamas official in Syria, Muhammad Nazzal, told The Associated Press that Carter had sent an envoy to Damascus earlier, requesting a meeting with the Islamist group's officials, including Mashaal, and that Hamas "welcomed the request."

Meanwhile in Washington, the US State Department said it had advised Carter against meeting any representative of Hamas.

"US government policy is that Hamas is a terrorist organization and we don't believe it is in the interest of our policy or in the interest of peace to have such a meeting," spokesman Sean McCormack told reporters.

He said the message had been conveyed directly to Carter in a phone call during the past week by Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs David Welch.

Peres's spokeswoman said he had accepted Carter's request to meet with him because of their shared past and because he respected the former president's role in advancing peace between Israel and Egypt. An Israeli diplomatic official said many European politicians and diplomats have gone to Damascus from Jerusalem.

A source close to Yishai said he had agreed to meet with Carter specifically because of his meeting with Mashaal. Yishai intends to send messages to Hamas via Carter that he hopes will help bring home kidnapped IDF soldier Gilad Schalit.

"Yishai said he was ready to meet with Hamas leaders himself to help bring home Schalit, so he has no problem meeting with Carter," a Yishai associate said. "He thinks that it is better to confront people with abhorrent views than to avoid them."

Lieberman said he intended to use the meeting with Carter to present his diplomatic plan for exchanges of population and territory.

A source connected to Netanyahu said that if there had been a question about whether he would meet with Carter before his decision to meet with Mashaal, that decision killed any chances of a Carter-Netanyahu meeting.

Carter Center spokeswoman Deanna Congileo confirmed there was a planned trip by Carter to the Middle East, but could not confirm any specifics on eventual meetings or the itinerary.

Congileo said Carter would lead a study mission to Israel, the West Bank, Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Jordan from April 13-21, as part of the Carter Center's ongoing effort to support "peace, democracy and human rights in the region."

A Carter-Mashaal meeting would be the first public contact in two years between a prominent American figure and officials of Hamas, branded a terrorist organization by the United States and Israel.

In 2006, US veteran civil rights leader Rev. Jesse Jackson met with Mashaal in Syria.

According to another Hamas official in Syria, Moussa Abu Marzouk, who is the deputy head of Hamas' political bureau, Hamas and Carter will discuss Shalit's fate.

In an interview with the Kuwaiti Al-Qabas newspaper on Sunday, Abu Marzouk said Shalit would not be returned alive if Israel failed to release 350 Palestinians it holds prisoner.

Mashaal heads Hamas's political bureau and is believed to be its top leader. He fears an assassination by Israel, which tried to kill him in 1997, when agents sprayed him with poison on a street in Amman.

Rep. Mark Kirk (R-Illinois) pleaded with Carter from the floor of the US House of Representatives not to meet with Mashaal, who he said was responsible for the murders of at least 26 Americans.

"President Carter, the voices from the grave beseech you - do not meet with the man who ordered the murder of these American citizens," Kirk said.